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Suppression, repression, and expression: Black anger in Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, and The marrow of tradition

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Suppression, Repression, and Expression: Black Anger in

Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, and The Marrow of Tradition
(TITLE)

BY

Tammy F. Veach

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Much of the critical response to Mark Twain and his treatment of race falls in one of two extremes. The first group labels him a racist and constantly calls for the banning of his books, especially Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, because they excessively use the epithet "nigger" and serve to ridicule blacks in general. The other group tries to ignore completely or refute entirely the first one. They consider Twain to be almost superhuman, a man completely transcending the views of his society, presenting in his works a notion of complete racial equality.

My view of Twain lies somewhere in between. While he does transcend many barriers in his treatment of race, I am unsatisfied with his handling of black anger in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson. In Huck Finn, Jim lets society convince him that he is worth $800, lets Huck make him worry that he is dead in the fog episode, and lets Tom Sawyer inflict bodily and emotional pain upon him, all the while suffering in complete silence. His reactions are somewhat less than human; he seems incapable of feeling any anger at all. At the end of the novel, Tom gives Jim forty dollars for being such a good prisoner, and they all live happily ever after, even though Jim has been humiliated and dehumanized in the last third of the novel.

In Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain at least realizes that blacks can feel angry, but by writing the principal

sufferer, the culturally black Chambers, out of the novel, he fails to deal openly with the issue. The only anger shown by the black characters is directed either at an innocent person instead of the one who inflicts the pain (as when Roxy switches the babies), an anger that is at best defused or diluted because it is not directed at the source, or it is inconsequential anger (as when the slaves steal small household items from their master when he mistreats them). The other angry character, Tom Driscoll, serves to show Twain's belief that anger is a function of society and not race.

Twain's limitations are even more evident when he is compared to Charles W. Chesnutt, a black Southern novelist. While Twain was perhaps not comfortable dealing openly with black activism, it must be pointed out that only seventeen years after the publication of Huck Finn and only seven after the publication of Pudd'nhead Wilson, the South produced a novelist in Chesnutt who dealt with the issue, in The Marrow of Tradition, published in 1901.

Chesnutt realizes that black anger can be a tool to force a change in white attitudes: if no blacks were ever to show their anger, the whites could treat them as inferior forever. Chesnutt's character Josh Green is an embodiment of this black anger. He stands up against the whites and is killed in the process, stating before the confrontation, "I'd ruther be a dead nigger any day dan a live dog!" (284).

Even though the novel's ending does not depict a change in the status quo, at least Chesnutt acknowledges the existence of black anger.

An inferior novelist in terms of craft, Chesnutt is, however, able to knock down a wall that still confines Twain. Though they wrote during the same time period, Twain seems to view blacks as only capable of suffering in silence, as Jim and Chambers do, or as expressing anger in a mis-directed way, as Roxy does, while Chesnutt's Josh seems a prophecy of the emergence of a Malcolm X. Chesnutt demolishes a barrier that still imprisons Twain. However, even though Twain does not completely destroy the wall of racism, he at least cracks its foundation. The two authors together come close to causing the wall to crumble.

Of the central recurring issues in the late nineteenth century/ early twentieth century literature of the American South, that of race is perhaps the most volatile. The fiction of the time reflected a society which, despite the end of the Civil War, was still divided on the issue. In contrast to the tide of blatantly racist texts being published, authors such as Mark Twain and Charles Chesnutt were writing texts that represented a movement toward racial equality. Yet in Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson there is a disturbing thread of latent racism woven into his anti-racist fabric, that of the suppression of his black characters' anger.

Ultimately, and certainly outwardly, Twain is anything but a racist. But Twain's failure to deal with the expression of black anger is unsettling. Albert V. Schwartz, in his assessment of the juvenile novel Sounder, makes a particularly interesting remark on the issue, one that could also apply to Twain's works:

> Within the institution of white supremacy, Black people are supposed to express no resentment and suffer in silence. Black militancy today is forcing whites to consider Blacks as human beings, but at the time the story took place, white people assumed that Blacks were incapable of such human emotion as anger. In the literature of the Southern Tradition, Black people suffered, if at all, in silence (149).

Schwartz has identified a basic element in being human: feeling and expressing anger. Anger is a normal human emotion--who has not felt and expressed anger at some time? When someone injures us or insults us or degrades us, we instinctively feel angry; we respond by fighting back. It is natural to feel this way; we are born with this emotion. Yet as Schwartz notes, white supremacists denied blacks the power of this response. When abused, blacks were not allowed to rise against whites in an act of anger. They were forced to suppress this elemental part of being human, were forced to choke down their anger and indeed suffer silently. In his attempt to break free from the social attitudes of his time, Mark Twain employs some of those very traditions he is working against.

Before I proceed further, perhaps I should clarify my position on Twain and these two novels. To focus on the issue of race in these works is to put oneself in a situation that is both somewhat precarious and extensively discussed. Any criticism of these works must first be made from a position of admiration; I cannot and am not willing to deny their greatness. Secondly, discussion of the race question has taken up considerable space in print since it became a focal point of critical debate in the 1960s, yet those old controversies still remain largely unsettled even into the 1980s. Were I to label Twain racist, I would not be alone even today.

Schwartz' commentary came in 1985, and in that same year critic Donald B. Gibson went so far as to claim that Twain "believes slavery is all right as long as slaves are not treated badly" (107). Gibson can be lumped into a group of critics which repeatedly calls for the banning of Twain's works, especially Huck Finn, even today. Conversely, I believe the novel does introduce and develop strongly anti-racist attitudes. I do not agree with such critics as Gibson, who states that Twain presents Jim as being "nothing but undignified, superstitious, ignorant, and comical" and as being "no different from the 'minstrel show nigger' or the comical darky of plantation literature" (104). I do not find the relationship between Huck and Jim to be "demeaning" to Jim (105). And I completely disagree with Kenny J. Williams' 1984 assessment that the 160 times the word "nigger" is used proves Twain is a racist, or even that it is so burdensome to the story that "only the most perceptive" readers can defend it (41).

There is too much evidence in the novel which refutes these claims. The beauty and tenderness with which Twain describes the two on the raft, the strong moral stance Huck represents when he decides "all right then, I'll go to hell" (187), the appalling episode in chapter six in which the ignorant, bigoted Pap Finn ridicules the extremely well-educated black college professor, the fact that Jim

loves his family "just as much as white folks does," and the pathos of the scene in which the rats bite Jim and he gets up and "writes a line in his journal whilst the ink [is] fresh" (232), to name but a few examples, serve to undermine such claims of racism. I think Twain uses the epithet "nigger" so extensively to challenge his readers, to point to the very baseness and hatefulness of the term to which those critics who would label him racist object. No, Twain did not have to use the term 160 times, but he wanted to do so, I believe, for verisimilitude and in order to uncover completely the social ironies and prejudices the term comes to represent.

Twain reveals in his sensitivity to the humanity and the appalling suffering of blacks and is greatly disturbed by slavery and by the way blacks in his society are treated, issues he will present even more explicitly in The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson.

However, I must make it clear that I do not belong to the other critical extreme, that of either trying to ignore completely or refute entirely the cries of racism. I do not accept the evaluation of Twain as almost superhuman, a man completely transcending the views of his society and presenting in his works a notion of complete racial equality.

In Huck Finn, for example, Jim lets society convince him that he is worth $800, lets Huck make him worry that he is

dead in the fog episode, and lets Tom Sawyer inflict bodily and emotional pain upon him, all the while suffering in complete silence. His reactions are somewhat less than human--he rarely expresses any anger at all. At the end of the novel, Tom gives Jim forty dollars for being such a good prisoner, and they all live happily ever after, even though Jim has been humiliated and de-humanized in the last third of the novel. Jim's suffering is in silence, and as Schwartz would note, by having Jim react this way, Twain has in a sense emasculated him or dehumanized him in some way. Jim is denied the understandable and human emotion of anger. Despite all of the barriers he manages to shatter completely in Huck Finn, this is one that still imprisons Twain; he is still held back by his failure to deal with the venting of black anger.

In Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain at least seems to realize that blacks can feel anger, but by writing the principal sufferer, Chambers (the "real" Tom Driscoll), out of the novel, he fails to deal openly with the issue. The only anger shown by the "black" characters is either felt by an innocent person instead of the one who inflicts the pain (as when Roxy switches the babies), an anger at best defused or diluted even though it is in a sense directed at her master because he does not feel the sting of her anger; his son does. Or it is inconsequential anger (as when the slaves steal small household items from old master Driscoll when he mistreats them). The other angry character in the novel, Tom

Driscoll, the "real" Chambers), serves to show Twain's belief that anger is a function of society and not of race.

From the examples cited above, I can agree with Gibson's assessment that Twain's "intentions were in the large measure good, but [he] was not able to overcome the limitations imposed upon his sensibilities by a bigoted early environment" (108). While I do not believe that Twain was a racist, I feel that it is important that we do not simply gloss over his limitations. Though Twain's attitudes were in many ways far ahead of those of his society, he was not superhuman. His vision, like anyone else's, was not completely perfect. Nor can we ultimately expect it to be. But by examining his limitations, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of his works. By looking at the bounds he fails to transcend, we also get a clearer picture of the ones he demolishes. Twain's struggle to transcend the barriers of racism which he learned even as a child is evident in his novels and is not a completely negative part of those works. It simply serves as an example of a mind actively working to change, which is perhaps the best model he could have given his society and his readers even today, still struggling to overcome a racism whose core lies deep below the surface.

Finally, we can also get a better understanding of Twain by comparing him to other authors and their treatments of black anger. While Twain was perhaps not comfortable dealing openly with black activism, it must be pointed out that only

seventeen years after the publication of Huck Finn in 1884 and only seven years after Pudd'nhead Wilson in 1994, the South produced a novelist who dealt with the issue, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, the first great black novelist in America. Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition, his most explicit treatment of the issue, was published in 1901. Though an inferior novelist in terms of craft, Chesnutt was able to do what Twain did not--to deal openly with the controversial and explosive issue of black anger.

I. Runaway Jim: No Spark of Anger

One of the more prominent occasions of Jim's repressed anger in Huck Finn occurs in the familiar fog episode of chapter fifteen, "Fooling Poor Old Jim." Jim's response to the trick Huck has played upon him reveals not anger, but emotional pain:

> "What do dey stan' for? I's gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you was los', en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back ag'in, all safe en soun', de tears come en I cou'd 'a' got down on my knees and kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat

> puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.'
>
> Then he got up slow and walked to the wigwam and went there without saying anything but that (77).

In "The Paradox of Liberation in Huckleberry Finn," Neil Schmitz identifies this passage as an example of Jim actually venting his anger, striking "unerringly at a vulnerable spot" in Huck by equating him with a class of people, white trash, that includes his despised father. Says Schmitz, "The hurt is exchanged. Huck is made aware of Jim's outraged self" (132-33). I do believe that Huck becomes aware that he has hurt Jim, but Jim releases his anger in an utterly passive way.

The overall tone of this passage is not anger, but emotional pain. Even the title of the chapter indicates that we are to feel sorry, as Huck (or Twain?) does, for "poor old Jim." Jim does not seem to be asserting his "outrage" as much as his dejection at having been betrayed. He reacts as someone who is indeed in need of pity. Jim, who is prone to using exclamations when he is excited or impassioned (for example, his response to Huck's return in this same chapter), here speaks in withdrawn, simply declarative sentences. He follows up this recounting of his feelings being so deeply hurt by slowly rising and leaving Huck's company, without even waiting for a reaction. That is all there is, no ranting or raging or clenched fists. While anger would certainly be an

understandable--and human--reaction, Jim's words and actions do not reveal a great deal of open, expressed anger. Since Huck is a white Southerner, Jim's rebuke is perhaps a bold move, but it does not adequately convey the extreme anger that Jim would have understandably felt at having been tricked in this manner by someone he loved and had worried over. In this exchange, Jim seems not like a person who is outraged and in a fury, but more like the stereotypical "Mother" trying to instill guilt feelings in her offspring. Instead of viewing this scene as Jim putting Huck in his place, I see it as a prime example of Jim having suffered emotionally, but not allowing the anger he feels at such suffering to boil over completely.

And yet Twain does not fully utilize the power that even such a passive show of anger can have. Even though Jim retreats to the wigwam "without saying anything but that," this draws a reaction from Huck:

> But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed <u>his</u> foot to get him to take it back.
>
> It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger--but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwords, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way (77).

Jim's response, albeit diluted anger at best, is still

enough to draw a very real response from Huck, who seems to move a step closer to realizing Jim is a human being because he can feel this human emotion. In fact, it is in the very next chapter that Huck contrives the small-pox story to protect Jim, preventing the two trappers from searching the raft for runaway slaves. Perhaps Jim's response has made Huck aware of his humanity.

In part Jim's guilt trip has worked; Huck's conscience is making him feel "mean," but Huck's conscience has probably never been inspired by a "nigger" before. More than this, the incident brings out some important points about Huck and by extension the Southern consciousness: 1) Before this incident, Huck (the Southerner) has no idea that Jim (the black) is capable of "feeling that way," that anger is even a possible response from a black and that 2) once the Southerner realizes the black <u>does</u> possess such emotions, he vows never to treat him this way again. Before I carry my generalization too far, I must qualify it by saying it is the sympathetic person who is capable of responding this way, not the hopelessly ignorant bigot like Pap Finn. But Twain at least recognizes the existence of such people as Huck and points out that even such subdued anger can make them re-cast their views of blacks. Yet once Twain flirts so quietly with this notion, he abandons it in the rest of the novel.

Throughout the novel, Jim demonstrates a stoic acceptance of whatever the whites say. As early in the novel as the Jackson Island scenario, in only our second glimpse of Jim,

we see this complete assimilation of the attitudes of whites surface in him. As Jim relates to Huck the reasons why he ran away from Miss Watson, he explains:

> . . . Well one night I creeps to de do' poorty late, en de do' warn't quite shet, en I hear old missus tell de widder she gwyne to sell me down to Orleans, but she didn't want to, but she could git eight hund'd dollars for me, en it 'uz sich a big stack o' money she couldn' resis' (39).

This cold, materialistic valuation is completely absorbed by Jim; he even comes to view himself this way, as he relates to Huck after telling him of the fortune (fourteen dollars) he has lost and that he will be rich again someday. He says to Huck "en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars" (430). Jim's sense of self comes directly from the unfeeling, materialistic, and dehumanizing values of the Southern white society. Instead of rebelling against those values, Jim simply accepts them, completely and unquestioningly. Even though he rebels against those values by running away and talks of hiring an abolitionist to help him steal his wife and children, Jim does not give any indication that he thinks what the whites are doing to the blacks as a whole is wrong; he does not speak out against the institution of slavery. He merely flees out of fear of being sold further South. Had this threat not existed, he would have continued to live within the confines of slavery at the

Watson home. Jim does not respond to slavery on anything other than the most personal terms; he flees, and he speaks of freeing his family, but he does not extend this desire for freedom to other blacks.

In a literary sense, Twain is well-served by not making Jim angry. By doing so, he creates a sense of tragic irony--we can see how appalling Jim's situation is even if he does not. But by writing the novel in this manner--presenting in Jim a character who shows little anger at what has been done to him--Twain relies almost exclusively upon his audience to become outraged at the treatment of blacks. If a reader is sensitive to the suffering of blacks, this can work. But if a person either becomes angry when black stereotypes are used or accepts the stereotypes and harbors prejudices towards blacks, as certainly many readers in Twain's day must have felt, such a portrait would fuel those very stereotypes they have accepted: blacks are meek, docile, subservient. The reader who becomes outraged when such stereotypes are used could easily become blinded by his frustrations when reading the portrait of a suffering-in-silence Jim. If a reader can empathize with the plight of blacks without becoming distracted by the stereotype, then Twain's tragic irony works well: <u>we</u> see the truth; <u>we</u> feel Jim's anger for him. But the very people who harbor the prejudices in the first place would see Jim as a passive "nigger," just as they would view angry blacks as barbarians. By relying on the reader to see

what Jim does not, Twain is using a technique that either works very well or not at all. Moreover, even if it works, it reinforces a view of blacks that is not entirely true. As the slave narratives, such as that of Frederick Douglass, will attest, a good many of these slaves did indeed feel angry.

However, the above are mild examples of Jim's acceptance, without question or anger, of whatever the whites want to say about or do to him. In the last fifty pages of the novel, the section devoted to the "freeing" of Jim, he is degraded by a deluded Tom Sawyer, who sees Jim not as a person, but as a source of entertainment and romantic adventure. Jim accepts this treatment, and equally disturbing, Huck goes along with it, too, despite what he has discovered about Jim's humanity in the two hundred pages preceding this section. From the very onset of Tom's intervention we can see that he has absolutely no regard for Jim. He immediately rejects Huck's practical plan, which would free Jim in a matter of minutes, because such a plan would not allow for an adventure. As Tom Sawyer puts it, "There ain't no hurry" to free Jim (204), this of course because he is not the one suffering.

But even the one who <u>is</u> suffering goes along with Tom's plan without question. At one point the boys actually spring Jim in the middle of the night (226) by sliding the chain off the bedpost (which Tom acknowledged as a boring alternative from the very start), but this momentary freedom

is only so Jim can help them move a grindstone to the shed and dig their tunnel larger. What is so striking is the fact that Jim would allow his freedom to be controlled by this young boy. Jim had to feel threatened by being held captive so deeply in the South that it seem ludicrous that he would not have fled to the river at the first chance he got, just as he fled at the beginning of the novel when he first discovered Miss Watson's threat of sending him South. Instead of becoming angry when he fully realizes how easily and how quickly he can be freed, Jim just goes along with the plan. Such a reaction makes the ending of the novel almost completely unbelieveable. As Neil Schmitz says in "Twain, Huckleberry Finn, and the Reconstruction," the entire Phelps farm sequence is "an affront. . . because the humanity of its prime character is patiently, systematically destroyed" (61). According to Schmitz, Jim's legal freedom is ultimately meaningless because of his failure in the end to ask "Why, if already free, did I have to perform in such demeaning charades?" (62) And this is merely the beginning.

The list of abuses goes on and on. Tom adds a variety of snakes, spiders, and rats to the shed to complete the romanticized portrait of a prisoner, and all Jim can do is beg him to stop. He says, "Please, Mars Tom--doan talk so! I can't stan' it!" or "I doan want no sich doin's" (227), but beyond such pleadings we get no reaction from Jim beyond acceptance. The irony the reader faces on a subsequent reading--the fact of seeing a free man beg a child for his

freedom and to be treated humanely--is almost too much to bear (as if it is any easier to accept this treatment for a slave). I find my anger to be at the boiling point, and I am not just angry at Tom for perpetrating the action, but also at Jim for not being angry at Tom himself. This would be a human reaction, but Twain will only allow Jim to be a stereotype in this closing section. As Louis J. Budd notes,

> Because Twain's sympathy for the freedman had a condescending base, Huckleberry Finn could mistreat him so cruelly at the end that its total effect is seriously weakened. Twain had come far from Hannibal's attitude toward the Negro, but not far enough, even if almost anybody today would rather travel with Jim on a raft than Uncle Tom on a steamboat (105).

The only outburst that comes from Jim in the last fifty pages occurs after Tom tells him what a good time the reptiles, rodents and other pests (Tom included?) will have as they "swarm over" him. Jim replies, "Yes, dey will, I reck'n, Mars Tom, but what kine er time is Jim havin'? Blest if I can see de pint. But I'll do it ef I got to" (229). This meek protestation is all that we see first-hand, and it is immediately negated by the disclaimer that follows, but apparently Jim kept complaining about the plan until "Tom most lost all patience with him" because he didn't "appreciate" what he had (229-30). This prompts Jim to apologize to Tom and to say that he will not behave in this

way any more (230). This is the height of suppressed anger. Instead of venting his frustrations on Tom's spoiled little backside, Jim is forced into a meek apology. He is the prime example of subservience and docililty.

If Jim has not been humiliated enough throughout this whole prison sequence, from having to water flowers with his tears, putting up with the entire assortment of varmints Tom has so thoughtfully provided (and who keep him supplied with "ink"), and carving "Here a captive heart busted" in stone to satisfy the whims of a deluded white boy, the ultimate degradation comes in the rescue effort. Jim is completely emasculated by being forced to wear Aunt Sally's dress. It is one matter for the youth Huck to deliver a note at night, when no one will see him, but Tom is having Jim, a grown man, leave his clothing behind on the dummy in accordance with his plan. This is even more humiliating than the plan itself would at first indicate, because they are caught, and Jim is paraded before the people of the town in Aunt Sally's frock. Jim's reaction to this? He says nothing. Even upon being made an object of ridicule, Jim is not moved to anger.

Ultimately, Jim is without doubt a kind and gentle person, someone more concerned with the welfare of others than for himself. As the doctor relates, Jim gives up his chance for freedom (or so he thinks) in order to help save Tom's life. As David L. Smith points out, this is an act of nobility and a certain moral virtue (9), though I wonder what

Tom ever did to deserve having such superior values wasted on him. Jim is certainly superior to the whites in this instance. No other character in the novel has acted so selflessly , with the possible exception of Huck, who risks going to hell for Jim. Yet it is somewhat disturbing that Jim is still so passive in this situation. Even after Tom has been tended to, Jim makes no attempt to get away, although this chances for escape were probably good; even the doctor admits he had his hands full with Tom and could have done very little to stop Jim from fleeing.

Furthermore, Jim ultimately shows no resentment for being put in these circumstances, the direct result of Tom's elaborate escape plan--Hucks's simple plan would not have been likely to bring these consequen ces with it. As the doctor explains, even after he received help from the others and they were taking Jim into custody, "the nigger never made the least row nor said a word from the start" (248).

There is something disturbing about such a meek presentation of character. Julius Lester describes the passage which the doctor realates in this way:

> This depiction of a black 'hero' is familiar by now since it has been repeated in countless novels and films. It is a picture of the only kind of black that whites have ever truly liked--faithful, tending sick whites, not speaking, not causing trouble, and totally passive. He is the archetypal 'good nigger' who lacks self-respect, dignity, and

> a sense of self separate from the ones whites want him to have (44).

Lester's charges are strong and are, I believe, phrased in terms that are too absolute, lumping all whites in the same category just as blacks were--and still are, in many cases--so categorized. But he does raise some valid points not only about Twain, but also the way white readers and critics have responded to Jim and tried to justify his passive behavior. Why <u>is</u> Jim so passive and quiet? Why <u>doesn't</u> he ever react with anger?

I think in part Twain knew his audience and his purpose very well. He wanted to open the eyes of his readers and make them realize that blacks are human beings, too, capable of feeling for others, of love and devotion, of moral and dignified decisions, of placing others ahead of themselves. Perhaps Twain realized that his audience would not respond favorably to an angry, militant black, that this would cause an even further division between black and white than the one he was trying to bridge. As Budd notes, "It is realistic to suspect that [Twain] had a fear of losing touchy buyers" (106). But I am not completely satisfied by this, my rationalization for Twain's unacceptable omission of black anger in his works. And even if this were his purpose, the sacrifice of Jim's character, which he makes by turning him into a stereotype through this denied emotion, is just too great to justify his actions. Twain's omission of this issue weakens the novel, especially at the end. It

helps to reinforce an unrealistic picture of blacks: that they are all timid, docile, and tame as animals, and as easily controlled and manipulated.

Jim's reactions to being placed back into captivity and to his ultimate release are perhaps the most disturbing incidents of all. As the doctor relates, Jim offers him no resistance--no spark of anger there. Even as Jim is paraded back to the Phelps farm, hands tied behind his back and wearing a dress--the picture of helplessness and emasculinity--while being cursed at by his oppressors and the onlookers who want him hanged, "Jim never said nothing" (247). He obediently marches along, again offering no resistance and showing no anger at the people who are humiliating him with their curses. In this instance, Jim strikes me as Christ-like, as behaving as Christ did in the Christian myth when He was brought before His accusers. But I am not comfortable with this parallel, either. Twain has held this organized religion as suspect throughout the novel, most notably in that this <u>is</u> a religion that would send Huck to hell for protecting Jim as he has done. It also seems that religion serves the blacks, as Marx would say, as an opiate, as merely the means for the whites to keep black anger suppressed and maintain a social order. Thus Jim represents a comforting social reality for the whites: if they teach the blacks that they will get to heaven by repressing those negative emotions, then they (the whites) will have a bit more security.

For this reason, I am not quite comfortable with the notion that Jim's silent suffering makes him a noble character; instead it seems another way in which he has been manipulated by the whites. I do believe that Jim is a noble man because of what he endures and sacrifices, but I would find him a more satisfying, and a more complete, a more human character if he were given the opportunity to express anger. Instead his reaction in the last fifty pages of the novel--and especially the last ten--completely undermines the sensitive portrait of the first two hundred pages, instead making Jim appear as little more than a cardboard cut-out. Moreover, all of the nobility of his suffering is made meaningless by the fact that it was needless suffering: Jim is actually a free man the whole time.

The last straw is the apparent "buying off" of Jim in the last chapter. After the Phelpses discover that Jim was free all along, they release him and bring him to the house, giving him new clothes and plenty to eat. And when Tom gives him forty dollars for being such a "patient" prisoner,

> Jim was pleased most to death, and busted out, and says:
>
> 'Dah, now, Huck, what I tell you?--What I tell you up dah on Jackson Islan'? I tole you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it; en I tole you I ben rich wunst, en gwineter be rich ag'in, en it's come true; en heah she is! Dah, now, doan talk to me--signs is signs, mine I tell you; en I

knowed jus' 's well 'at I 'uz gwineter be rich ag'in as I's a-stannin' heah dis minute!' (253).

Instead of expressing outrage at all the torments and humiliation he was put through just for Tom and Huck's adventure, instead of being angry at having been imprisoned and almost hanged despite being a free man all along, Jim is delighted because Tom has given him the whopping sum of forty dollars. Furthermore, there is no mention, now that he is rich and free, of his former plan to free his wife and children. He does not think at all about his family still held in captivity. As a result, even the shreds of humanity that were established earlier have been torn away in this ending. In many ways, Jim is still a slave despite having been freed; he still has a subservient attitude toward whites. He is actually thankful for what Tom is doing for him in spite of all that has been done to him. Jim is bought off and cheapened in this ending sequence, and Twain allows it. This happily-ever-after ending completely ignores the fact that Jim has been humiliated and dehumanized.

Jim's reactions show a reluctance on Twain's part to deal with openly-expressed black anger. There is really no evidence in this novel that Jim is capable of feeling angry, and though Twain will recognize the existence of this anger in Pudd'nhead Wilson, he does not allow it to be expressed. Schwartz makes a point in his discussion of Sounder that again also applies to Twain's reluctance to face the issue. If Jim expresses anger, then

> . . . the writer might have to deal with Black 'activism'--perhaps even a Black Panther. While this might have intrigued the literary creative taste of a Black writer, one can see why a white author would hesitate to construct a [physically threatening] anti-white image (149).

While Twain indeed possessed racial attitudes that were advanced for his day, this one seems beyond him. Considering the radical nature of even Twain's attitudes, his post-bellum society most assuredly was not prepared to handle this controversial notion. This might explain Twain's withdrawal from the issue.

Twain seems to have negative feelings toward anger in general; as a whole, the angry characters in the novel are also the most unattractive ones: Pap Finn, the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, the angry mob which tarred and feathered the King and the Duke (despite all of their fraudulent dealings, Huck still feels sorry for the duo when he sees them in such a fix), and by contrast, his two heroes, Huck and Jim, are more passive and quiet; they run away rather than stand and fight. Back in the fog episode, when Jim interprets the tow-heads in his "dream" as "mean folks," Huck tells us that Jim said it meant that

> if we minded our business and didn't talk back and aggravate them, we would pull through and get out of the fog and into the big clear river, which was the free States, and wouldn't have no more trouble

(76).

And on numerous occasions Huck, in order to avoid confrontations, reports that he "never said nothing."

In some ways, this lack of anger links the two characters, and in many ways, we can applaud their lack of violence, their innocence in a corrupt world, but this also makes them seem almost too good to be true. However, the lack of anger on the part of the heroes of the novel does not reach a disturbing level until the Phelps farm sequence, and neither hero escapes this section with his dignity intact. We become upset with Huck for not standing up to Tom in defense of his friend and at Jim for not standing up for himself.

But this denial of anger does not have a completely adverse effect on even this segment of the novel. Even if the heroes do not respond angrily, the sympathetic reader does. Perhaps this <u>is</u> the reaction Twain is aiming for instead of a response of anger from his characters. Through his tragic irony, Twain expresses his outrage at the treatment of blacks in such dehumanizing ways, and his prose elicits a similar response in the reader, despite the fact that Twain himself dehumanizes Jim by denying any anger he might have felt, or perhaps even <u>because</u> of Twain's denial of black anger. As readers, we can get a stronger sense of Twain's struggle with racism because he does not completely overcome it. In some ways, this makes <u>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</u> a better book because it becomes a more <u>human</u>

book, an imperfect story with its own flaws and shortcomings. But in the face of a reader's angry reaction to the treatment of blacks, are we not forced to rethink our traditional response concerning Jim? How can we hold him as being a dignified human being when he has not been presented as a human being? Instead he seems an object of our pity, especially in this troubling Phelps farm sequence. The tragic irony Twain employs might indeed inspire anger in the reader as he sees the situation blacks faced, but when we isolate Jim from the novel, will his character bear close scrutiny? Once we realize the often unrealistic, unhuman portrait we have been given, can we ever completely erase this image form our minds and go back to applaud Twain's mastery of tragic irony?

However, as a friend has pointed out to me, its is easy to dismiss this final section, but what do we supply in its place? She suggested that perhaps Jim could maintain his essential dignity if he were shot and killed in the failed rescue attempt. This would not undermine the harsh reality faced by blacks the way Twian's happy closing scene does. But even upon suggesting such an ending, she admits that this would change the genre from comedy to tragedy. In light of Twain's purpose, would an angry, militant Jim be just as great a contradiction as a tragic ending?

I believe that a Malcolm-X-like Jim would not only have been unacceptable to Twain's audience, but would also undermine the charm and elegance that he presents in the pair

as they float down the Mississippi. Perhaps what is called for in the Phelps farm episode is at least some of the subtle anger such as that expresed in the fog episode. This would at least allow Jim to be human, to begin to stand up for himself if not actually fighting, which would move Jim from an object of ridicule. The "humor" in the last segment, the absurdity of Tom's romantic visions, we must not forget, depends upon Jim's captivity and degradation. This light-heartedness would perhaps be toned down if Jim were still on center stage, as he is almost all the while he and Huck float down the river together, instead of being placed out of sight (and out of mind?) in the cabin in which he is being held, while Tom and Huck trick Aunt Polly and pilfer case knives and the like. If we could see Jim more, he could remind us that he is suffering. Twain tries to sweep this fact under the carpet in his ending, which affects the dignity of Jim as a character.

Yet, it is such a failing which, by contrast, makes the successes of the novel seem more prominent: Huck's risking hell for Jim, his poignant revelation that Jim cares as much about his family as whites do for theirs, and the love shown between the two, all seem more noble as scenes when compared with the ending of the novel. I only wish that the ending was not such an extreme contradiction of the humanistic portrait of the rest of the novel. On the one hand, it serves as a point of contrast, thereby making those humanizing passages more prominent, but the ending is so extreme that it is

dangerously close to undermining the earlier positive effects in the novel.

II. Roxy and Chambers: Anger Defused

If Huck Finn were the only novel in which Twain presented this repressed anger, I would conclude that this is just the nature of Jim as a character. After all, he shows no anger or hostility toward the black man who swindled him of his fortune (42). Maybe he is just a gentle person. But this passivity is also shown in the presentation of Chambers in The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson, which leads me to conclude that Twain is uncomfortable with the notion of black anger. This discomfort, I believe, indicates that Twain has a tinge of racism lurking beneath the surface. The two seem almost interrelated. The lack of anger indicates the racism; the racism enables him to present portraits of blacks which are at times dehumanizing. In one sense, we see black anger clearly present in Tom, but that anger has been culturally produced from the moment of his transformation from black to white. Thus Twain both illustrates and erases black anger. Tom's anger is presented as culturally white, while Chambers suffers docilely.

The main way in which Pudd'nhead Wilson differs from Huck Finn is that in this novel Twain at least acknowledges the existence of black anger, but he gives it no appropriate outlet. Blacks must either keep their anger utterly

repressed, must vent anger upon other blacks that is really felt toward whites, or must express anger toward whites in insubstantial, petty ways.

For example, Twain illustrates early in the novel that the slaves sometimes try to get back at the whites by stealing small items of little consequence. As Twain sees it:

> They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy--in a small way; in a small way, but not in a large one (32).

In this way, they pay the whites back for all the years of repression and suffering, for all the years of being treated as objects and not people, by stealing "a brass thimble, or a cake of wax, or an emery bag, or a paper of needles, or a silver spoon, or a dollar bill. . ." (32).

Thus the black vengeance at beign treated this way is reduced to the pilfering of small, worthless articles, to what amounts to virtually no anger of any consequence. And when Driscoll catches his slaves swiping a couple of dollars, he subjects them to undignified begging and pleading so that he will not sell them down river. When he says he will sell them to good masters, they respond by kissing his feet (33). This, ultimately, is what their petty acts of anger lead to: further degradation and humiliation.

Upon witnessing this repressive scene, Roxy responds not with anger, but with fear and despair, and then turns these

feelings to an anger of sorts vented upon her child: she is going to perform the violent act of killing him to save him from this degradation, indicating that Roxy thinks it better to be dead than so degraded. The only direction Roxy can turn to release the anger this society has caused her is to her weak and innocent child, technically labelled black because of his 1/32 part of "black blood." Instead, at the last minute, she stumbles upon the idea of switching the babies. In this act to protect her child, she subjects another innocent child to the same tortures she had feared her own child would face, tortures worse than death. This only substantial act of revenge in the novel is made not so much out of anger or defiance as fear, and it is directed not at the source of her suffering, her master, but instead on his innocent child. Perhaps Twain is claiming that no white is truly innocent as long as blacks are treated as less than human, but to me that seems as problematic as a notion of original sin. This infant has done nothing to harm Roxy or anyone, and yet he is the one who suffers and must endure slavery. Major Driscoll is not really punished at all, for he never realizes that he is being punished. He thinks he is raising his child, and even if he is not, he never finds this out. Therefore he is not forced to feel the pain the way his son Tom will, who is forced to live the existence of a slave and to be know from this point on as Chambers, while the real Valet de Chambre assumes Tom's rightful place and name. Roxy's is certainly a misplaced anger, if any anger at

all. For if the real Thomas a Becket Driscoll has any right to be angry, which it would seem he most assuredly does, the source of his anger is not only the whites for establishing the institution of slavery, but also this "black" woman for actually making him feel the stings of an oppression he would not have otherwise faced.

More directly, in the example of Chambers as a child, Twain provides us a moving picture of the suppression of anger:

> In baby hood Tom cuffed and banged and scratched Chambers unrebuked, and Chambers early learned that between meekly bearing it and resenting it, the advantage all lay with the former policy. The few times that his persecutions had moved him beyond control and made him fight back had cost him very dear at headquarters. . . . Percy Driscoll told Chambers that under no provocation whatever was he privileged to lift his hand against his little master. Chambers overstepped the line three times, and got three such convincing canings.. . that he took Tom's cruelties in all humility after that and made no more experiments (41-2).

Twain seems to have a real understanding of and sympathy toward the inhumanity of such treatment. It even places blacks below animals: if a man kicks a dog, he expects the dog to bite; if he kicks a black man, he expects him to kiss the foot that did the damage. The culturally black Chambers'

"tragedy is that he is made to endure all of the social, psychological, and physical torments the 'subhuman' slave receives from the master race" (Hogan 10). He is expected to silently and paitently endure, without being outwardly angry or resentful.

Roxy, too, is a victim of this hidden anger eating away at her. Her rage boils over, but it has no meaningful outlet; her anger is only indirectly aimed at the cause. Instead of venting her anger, it stays inside, causing her sleeplessness or making her mumble to herself or making her develop intricate plans of exposing Tom for who he really is in order to get revenge. However, "her schemes always went for nothing, and she laid them aside in impotent rage against the fates" (45). Roxy must learn to "subject herself to gross insults from her son" (Cracroft 25), which is an act that runs almost contrary to nature. The child in this case is both literally and symbolically the master of the parent. Roxy's anger is very much like black anger in general in this novel--impotent, displaced, dehumanizing--even though she does more with anger than anyone else in the novel.

It is interesting that Tom, the "real" Chambers, is allowed to vent his anger only after becoming white, from the "moment of his usurpation" (39). His is such a violent release--holding his breath, crying, screaming, nearly going into convulsions. Certainly, as a black child it would be understandable for him to respond this way, at least on a symbolic level--I am not claiming that blacks are by nature

violent, but that whites have given them reason to be angry. On a symbolic level, it would be an understandable reaction for the infant Chambers to scream and cry because of his fate as a slave, but once he becomes Tom, a free and "white" child, his anger seems to have no source. What would this pampered chld have to be angry about? He certainly has not faced the oppression of his "black" counterpart, the usurped Tom, living the life of the slave, Chambers.

Note how this puzzling reversal in identity also helps to muddle where the appropriate source and outlet for anger really lie. When the "white" child cries and screams it is actually the real "black" child, so in this instance black anger is given a voice. But now the release of anger is unnecessary--living by the white rules, he faces no hardships and no oppression. Perhaps the reaction is only understandable on a symbolic level: Tom is angry at the loss of identity, now that he is no longer allowed to be his true self, Chambers. In this way he represents his entire race; through the repression of their anger, blacks have also lost part of their identity and humanity. One thing the reversal does show is that whites are not inherently more heroic, more capable of expressing anger, because the false Chambers never expresses it. Thus Twain insists that race, as well as anger, is culturally defined, not biologically.

In this respect Tom and Chambers are essentially both black and white. Chambers, the "real" Driscoll, is biologically white, yet in cultural terms he is as black as

the rest of the slaves. His speech is the black dialect, but more than this, he has been conditioned into the slave mindset: suppressing his anger, fearing his "white" master, behaving in meek and passive ways. This adds to the tragedy at the end of the novel: even when the truth is discovered, "Chambers" remains in a large measure a black slave, unable to feel anger and unable to function in his "rightful" place in white society because his speech, habits, personality, and thoughts were shaped by his identity as a black for all those years.

Tom Driscoll, in turn the rightful "Chambers," is in the same way culturally white though biologically having 1/32 part black blood, which is enough to have him considered fully black by white society when the truth is discovered. Tom is raised with a white mindset, so much so that he even responds with extreme outrage when Roxy tells him that he is black; his values are those of white society, so that he feels this outrage and self-denial when he learns the truth about himself. As a white he has completely accepted the valuation of blacks as inferior, so, paradoxically, he believes in his own inferiority, since this society considers him black once it knows the truth.

This is another way Twain points to the cultural base for race. Twain depicts a society that can in the case of Roxy deny her fifteen parts of "white" blood and count only that one part of "black" blood, and with Chambers (Tom) count his one drop of black blood over the thirty-one white. Thus,

it is this society which defines the terms "white" and "black," not any standards of biology. Chambers and Tom remain the same biologically throughout the entire novel, of course; it is the society that decides that Chambers is black and Tom white at the beginning, Roxy who decides Tom will become Chambers and therefore black and Chambers will become Tom and white when she switches the babies, and society which again reverses the race classifications at the end once they learn the truth, although the last change is for the most part meaningless because "Tom" has already formed a white identity for himself and "Chambers" a black one during the years they were raised in these respective sub-cultures. Because of this cultural base for race, the confusing paradox of the novel surfaces, as Leslie Fiedler notes: The "seeming slave is free, but the free man is actually a slave" (408).

Race is not the only culturally-defined entity in this novel; society also decides who can be angry. As I mentioned earlier, much of the anger in this novel is displaced. A perfect example of this is when Roxy vents her anger at Chambers for telling her about Tom's gambling debts (62). She even threatens to "knock [him] side de head" because he relays this news and refuses to deny its accuracy. She is really angry not at Chambers, but at Tom for getting in debt and thus jeopardizing not only his future, but also her own.

Tom, too, uses Chambers for target practice, releasing the anger he feels over the emotion shown him by a "nigger" woman, Roxy. When Chanmbers presents Tom with Roxy's

request to see him, he responds by cuffing him and then kicking him three times, out the door. Tom realizes that Chambers is a whipping boy for him, saying "He arrived just at the right moment; I was full to the brim with bitter thinkings, and nobody to take it out of. How refreshing it was! I feel better" (64). Chambers is nothing but an object to him, an instrument to use for his own pleasure.

In addition to revealing the need to feel superiority, to dominate someone or something, and in addition to pointing out a terrible social reality in the form of white masters beating their slaves, Twain's scenario also says quite a bit about the role of expressing anger. Being allowed to express anger serves the psychological function of allowing us to "feel better." As humans we have a very real need to release this emotion; otherwise our frustration builds even more. Thus when white supremacists deny blacks the right to be angry, it causes psychological as well as sociological damage. Not only must such a person suppress his or her original feelings of anger, but must also keep repressed the additonal frustration felt at not having an outlet for anger in the first place. Eventually that much repressed emotion will take its toll, either in creating a shell of a human being, a person who responds like a dog who has been kicked too much, as Jim does, or it will result in a violent explosion. Twain presents us with both reactions: Chambers practically lies down and rolls over as Tom kicks him, and Roxy's anger eventually reaches such a boiling point that

she clubs a slave overseer with a broom handle.

When Chamnbers is kicked to relieve Tom's frustrations, he responds only by saying "Please, Marse Tom!--Oh, please Marse Tom" upon receiving each of his seven blows, and "limped away, mopping his eyes with his old, ragged sleeve" (64) after being kicked. It is interesting that Roxy and Tom both direct their anger for each other at Chambers. He is such an easy target because he is so docile. He is the one who deserves to be most angry of all, yet he responds only with beggings and bawlings, not resentment. His reaction is not a human one, for he had the humanity caned out of him as a child. His society has denied him access to this emotion.

But the only anger of real consequence that breaks free during the novel is Roxy's anger toward Tom for the way he has treated her, and this is a situation that she has created herself; she is not a completely innocent victim like Chambers. In many ways, it is less justifiable and less satisfying to have this anger be the one given a voice, because Roxy <u>chose</u> to make Tom her master. If Roxy were crying out against the whole system of slavery, it would be another matter, but she is not (at least not in the latter portion of the novel). She is merely crying out against the pain of having her own son treat her this way. Yet she put him in that position, so the anger she releases when she gets the upper hand over Tom is less satisfying than, say, Chambers having a chance to vent his anger would be. In many

ways, Roxy just creates a new slavery instead of something positive; Tom now becomes her slave because she instills the fear of disclosure in him. She is like a master in that she is "aggressive and commanding" and "needs to rule over something or somebody" (77), which is a less attractive feature of human nature. Twain chooses to describe Roxy's anger in this instance in such a way that it not so much elevates Roxy, but causes the degradation of someone else.

A final point Twain makes about anger is that it is perhaps conditioned out of the slaves due to their excessive suffering. Such extreme suffering, Twain illustrates, leads not to a violent, outward emotion, but to an inner sense of mourning, although I would qualify this by saying that such a reaction of turning the pain inward is more pronounced in someone with a lower self-worth. Someone with a high regard for himself or herself would be more likely to see the injustice in the way they have beeen treated and would be more likely, in turn, to lash out against this injustice. Someone who has been brow-beaten would be more likely to turn this pain inward. Such is the case of Roxy after her spirits are broken because her own son has sold her down the river into slavery. She says:

> I is all brokedown en wore out now, en so I reckon it ain't in me to storm aroun' no mo', like I used to when I 'uz trompled en 'bused. I don't know--but maybe it's so. Leastaways, I's suffered so much dat mournin' seem to come mo' handy to me now den

stormin' (129).

This appears to be the way Twain views the response of black people. In some ways, I am sure there is a validity to this argument, but in other ways, this can deny the integrity and self-worth of blacks and can turn them into stereotypical downcast, patient, and abused sufferers who can take anything thrown upon them, like a machine, without lashing out. Even though Twain is crying out against slavery, and by extension so is his reader, as I noted earlier, such reliance on tragic irony has its limitations. In trying to extablish the nobility of the blacks who suffered with such stoic resignation, Twain undermines their humanity.

As Roxy shows us, not all blacks were able to deny their humanity as extensively as Chambers or Jim did. When she is working on that Southern plantation her anger has to break free, and she clubs the overseer with his own broom handle when he beats the young girl with it for giving Roxy a potato to eat (131). Twain shows, realistically, that Roxy has to run from such a situation, given the social climate of the time, but at least he gives her that moment of nobility, of rising up against her oppressors. But then he undermines the power of this black anger at the end of the novel by silencing Chambers, the culturally-defined black man, and by letting the prejudiced townspeople have their way, restoring their racist notions to power. Their angry shouts as Wilson resolves the detective mystery serve as "an effective foil to Roxy's echoing but unheard cry of despair" (Cronin 16).

The focus suddenly shifts from the noble and understandable anger of the slaves to the narrow and unjustifiable racist outcry of the citizenry of Dawson's Landing, and they ultimately have their order restored. Twain is on the brink once again of completely dealing with this oppressed race's anger, but he backs away.

In a dramatic sense, Twain is once again presenting us with a social reality of his time: whites did see to it that the status quo was usually maintained. In this case his silencing of his black characters' anger is effectually realistic, because the whites did not pay a lot of attention to the feelings of blacks and would not allow them to express their anger at all. But as Chesnutt will point out, even though blacks were not able to force sweeping changes in whites' attitudes and actions, black anger did exist and was expressed, and on a more widespread scale than Twain was willing to admit. So this ending contributes to the paradoxical effect of the whole novel in general: Twain seems both to admit that black anger exists and at the same time to deny its existence. Thus he gives us glimpses of angry characters and then sweeps them quickly away, almost hoping we did not see their anger, while he tells us that they were not allowed to feel this way. Twain, too, seems as unwilling to allow the anger as society was, especially at the end of this novel. In fact it is at the end of both novels that he puts up the thickest smoke screens and most strongly denies the anger of blacks, or at least tries to

hide it. The triumph of Pudd'nhead at the end of the novel, for example, is an intellectual triumph; he has used science and reason to solve the case. This is what we are left with at the end of the novel: the victory of intellect over emotion. It seems as if Twain wants to bury black anger in the middle of his novels and end without their anger, as if the ending will leave a stronger impression in the minds of his readers and will make them forget he has come this close to exposing a dangerous issue.

It is odd that in a novel so devoted to anger the reaction to the situation that ultimately has the greatest potential for its expression is not shown. It would seem in places of this novel that Twain has a complete understanding of black anger and the suffering its repression causes. The poignant scene in which the young Chambers learns, by being beaten, that he is not allowed to follow through on his anger toward Tom, or by extension any white man, is surely an illustration that only a man sympathetic to suppressed black anger could create. But then he does the same thing at the end of his novel: he suppresses Chambers' anger simply by writing his character out of the action. He does not dwell upon Chambers' reaction to what has happened, stating simply, "We cannot follow his curious fate any further--that would be a long story" (167).

On the one hand this is true: he has not been writing Chambers' story all along, so it might seem odd for him to shift the focus to Chambers at this point. But the

underlying question is why couldn't he tell Chambers' story? His seems a thinly-veiled excuse. Twain has shown us in his works that he is not opposed to lengthy "digressions" if they are relevant, and Chambers' story would certainly be so. Instead, we never see how Chambers, the real Tom, deals with the great injustice that has been done to him. For even though "Chambers" is white in terms of "blood," in cultural terms he is black. By focusing on his story, Twain could have commented extensively on the plight of blacks. Instead, he writes Chambers out of the novel.

Did those canings as a child make Chambers suffer in silence like Jim, afraid of being beaten again? Or is it merely that Twain is not ready to deal with the notion of openly-expressed black anger? It is certain that Twain realized that his society <u>did</u> suppress the anger of blacks and completely denied the existence of such anger. But why did he not do something about this injustice? He created a perfectly justifiable situation for the expression of black anger, then wrote out of the novel the character who could have felt it. In both this novel and <u>Huck Finn</u>, Twain lights the fuse for an explosion of black anger, but then quickly runs away before we can hear or watch it detonate. In fact he even goes so far as to extinguish the very spark before it has a chance to burn. He does this by having his potentially angry characters respond in ultimately passive ways.

III. Charles Chesnutt's Josh Green: Anger Detonated

In his novel The Marrow of Tradition, Charles Waddell Chesnutt creates a voice for black anger in his characters Josh Green and Janet Miller. This was not an easy decision for Chesnutt to make, for he seemed almost to anticipate the consequences. He had long been a self-censoring writer, afraid that the reality he had witnessed would be one white readers would reject, as he writes to George Washington Cable in this letter of June 5, 1890, some eleven years before the publication of The Marrow of Tradition:

> The kind of stuff I could write, if I were not all the time oppressed by the fear that this line or that sentiment would offend somebody's prejudices, jar on somebody's American-trained sense of propriety, would, I believe, find a ready sale in England (Farnsworth v.).

But he finally wrote a book in Marrow which, due largely to the militantism of Josh Green, disturbed the white reading public. Paul Elmer More, literary editor of the Independent, writes in a review of The Marrow of Tradition that "Chesnutt had done what he could to humiliate the whites" and says the last chapter of the book (in which the Carterets come begging to the black Doctor Miller and his wife Janet for assistance with their son) is "utterly revolting" (xv.). As Farnsworth notes in his introduction to the novel, it is interesting that despite the many elements of craftsmanship in the novel with which to find fault, the critics completely

ignored these aspects of the work and instead attacked Chesnutt's racial views (xvi.).

Chesnutt's Marrow is not without its docile blacks, his two most prominent submissive black characters being Jerry and Jane. Mammy Jane is a former slave who dislikes the insolent attitudes of the younger generation of blacks. A young black woman who had a run-in with Mammy Jane says this about her and similar blacks:

> These old-time Negroes . . . made her sick with their slavering over the white folks, who, she supposed, favored them and made much of them because they had once belonged to them--much the same reason why they fondled their cats and dogs.

Chesnutt realizes the existence of both the docile and the "new," militant black like the young woman as hopefully mere "stages" in the black movement, labelling that of this young woman as the "chip-on-the-shoulder stage."

Jerry seems more like a character from Pudd'nhead Wilson: he is like the slaves who followed every command of their masters, yet staged small, insignificant rebellions. Jerry is frequently dispatched on errands for Major Carteret and his friends, most usually fetching them drinks and cigars, and he is quite skillful at sneaking the change, keeping it for himself. There is something more than a little pathetic about him; he buys a tonic to bleach his skin white, another to straighten his hair. He is so subservient to the whites that he turns on Sandy Campbell when the latter is accused of

murder. In these portraits, Chesnutt shows us that docility was a part of the black condition at this time, yet unlike Twain, he makes it clear that blacks do not have to act this way, that it is not a given that all blacks are willing to suppress their humanity and act like subservient dogs. However, in all fairness I must remember that Chesnutt is writing about the black condition after the institution of slavery has been abolished, while Twain places his characters in the slave society. But were the blacks of Chesnutt's society substantially more free than when they were the legal property of whites? Chesnutt makes it clear that the "freed" men of this post-Reconstruction society are similarly oppressed. With the abolishment of slavery, blacks can not be owned by anyone else, but this important legal distinction has little effect on the social existence of blacks: they are still treated as sub-human by the ruling white society, still have little opportunity to improve their condition, still are degraded and hated. And the fact that Twain chooses an anti-bellum setting for his novel perhaps suggests his need to distance himself from the blacks of his own society and from the notion of black anger. In contrast, Chesnutt chooses a contemporary setting, indicating his openness and willingness to deal with the problems of his society.

Furthermore, Chesnutt notes that there is another aspect of the issue of blacks acting docilely other than their mere self-protection. Twain duly notes that whites forced their

slaves into such timidity, such as the elder Driscoll does, by threatening to beat them or sell them to a cruel master if they stepped out of line. Twain points to the cause of docility in the slaves--fear of their white masters--but he turns his head away from the reason whites treat the blacks this way: keeping the blacks in a timid, fearful state fulfills a complex psychological need to feel superior, to dominate someone else, and it helps to assure the maintenance of the status quo.

Chesnutt seems keenly aware of this latter fact and does not shy away from it in his novel. He makes it clear why whites like docile blacks such as Jerry and Jane; as one supremacist in the novel states, "If they were all like Jerry, we'd have no trouble with them" (88). As long as blacks stoically accept the degradation thrust upon them by the whites, as long as they cower in fear or turn their anger inward, mumbling out their frustrations behind the backs of the whites instead of standing firmly before them and letting them know that they will not accept such treatment any longer, nothing in society will change. Even the ultimate "change" in Major Carteret's assessment of Dr. Miller at the end of the novel is the result of violence, which creates a state of desperation for the Carterets, although Miller was not personally involved in the uprising. Chesnutt realizes that black anger can be a tool that forces a change in white attitudes: if no blacks were ever to show their anger, the whites could treat them as inferiors forever. What would

prompt them to change unless they had something to lose by remaining the same? Education can bring about a change in values and attitudes, but such change is a slow process, and Pap Finn stands as a bold example of the entrenchment of resistance to change. The expression of anger can speed the process, and can at the very least give those completely opposed to change a reason for acting differently: personal fear. Anger seems almost a direct by-product of such social change, on the part of both blacks and whites (Schuman 6).

And there is often little advantage to a black person acting in submissive ways. A case in point from this novel is the character of Sandy Campbell, considered by the whites to be a "comical darky." Sandy, who is framed for a murder, is the docile servant of Mr. Delamere. Even though Carteret and his cronies comment that "Sandy is the last nigger" they would have ever suspected, they still jail him and prepare to lynch him, just as the people of Pikesville prepare to lynch Jim after they catch him. Even though both Chesnutt and Twain back away from such injustice and ultimately have their characters saved in the nick of time by some white character with special information (in the case of Sandy, he had a genuine alibi: he was with Josh Green at the time of the murder, but since Josh is also black, and a black militant at that, none of the white authorities will believe his story), there is more than just a suggestion of a political reality of the time.

In the face of this reality, it was more than a mere

possibility that a submissive black could meet the same brutal death at the hands of white mobs which an angry, militant black might face. Granted that the militant black's chances of such a fate were virtually guaranteed, whereas the submissive black might avoid it, there is still ample reason to believe that docile blacks suffered not only humiliation, but often the same brutal lynchings as out-spoken blacks who inspired the anger of the whites. To borrow a phrase from Huck Finn, "if the wages is the same," why should not a black be angry and militant, risking being a "dead nigger" than a "live dog," as Josh Green would add. This is the frightening question which the novel presents.

This is a question that each person would need to answer for himself or herself. For some that answer might be that any kind of life is better than no life at all, that patience and struggle <u>can</u> make one a better person. If one is dead, she has no chance, beyond that of being a martyr, to force any changes whatsoever in her society. Dr. Miller would probably respond this way. But Chesnutt also provides us with another equally justifiable answer in the person of Josh Green: there is also a powerful nobility in a people who will stand and fight, who will risk their very lives in order to maintain what they believe to be their dignity.

Dr. Miller is the character in the novel who some critics believe most closely parallels Chesnutt's own views of the race issue, which he evidences in his own life. He is not a violent man like Josh Green, whom we shall see later, but is

a pacifist, believing the way to promote change is not through fists, but reason. Even though he is humiliated in that he is forced onto a black car on a train and is not allowed to perform surgery on a white woman because of his skin color, he does not respond angrily. He is a logical thinker who realizes that in a confrontational situation, the blacks at this time are almost certain to lose, because they do not have the strength from a strong position in society that would be necessary to win in a confrontation against the white establishment. Yet he is not far-removed from Jim's stereotypic docility; he is merely able to rationalize his behavior.

He is also a very humane person, characterized like Jim by an ability to push his own feelings and needs into a secondary position before the needs of others. Even though Major Carteret is one of the primary forces which prohibits Miller from performing surgery on the whites (he will not let a better-trained Dr. Miller operate on his wife, instead having a lesser surgeon perform the operation), and despite the fact that Dr. Miller and his wife (the unacknowledged mulatto half-sister of Carteret's wife) see their child killed in the race riot at the end of the novel, a riot enflamed by Carteret's newspaper, Miller is able to put his personal suffering aside and operates on the Carteret's child, who has fallen ill during the riot. He swallows his pride in that the Carterets had checked with every available white doctor before they turned to him. But the broader

question we are left with at the end of the novel is whether Carteret's opinion of blacks will be permanently changed or if he is merely using Dr. Miller to save his child's life, although the indication is strong that the Carterets are merely acting out of desperation and not a change in attitude. Throughout such situations in the novel, Dr. Miller comes dangerously close to being an Uncle Tom, never standing up to the whites and letting them force him to swallow his pride on numerous occasions.

Miller's wife Janet seems to know an answer to the broad question of whether the Carterets are using the Millers and seems to be more insulted that they can attempt to shove a lifetime of degrading attitudes aside in such a brief moment. She rejects Mrs. Carteret's offers of sisterhood and familial recognition, saying

> All my life you have hated and scorned and despised me. Your presence here insults me and my dead (326).

It is only after extensive pleading by Mrs. Carteret that Janet lets her husband tend the Carteret child, and Janet still has the dignity not to accept her sister's offer of the inheritance she has been cheated out of. Janet's anger leads her to a dignified state, one in which she does not buckle under to the influence of whites. She is her own person, one who makes her feelings known, one who makes her own decisions instead of letting whites tell her what to think. She makes it clear to her sister that she realizes just how severely

she had been mistreated and is also aware that Mrs. Carteret has an ulterior motive--protecting her son's life--in her sudden display of kindness towards her unacknowledged sister.

Finally, Janet makes it clear who has the power, who is in control of this situation. She forces her half-sister to realize that she is her own person who will make her own decisions as she sees fit. She will not simply conform to the demands of the whites, instead making them recognize her essential humanity, her power to be her own person. No one will tell her what to think or how to feel. Miller, by contrast, is more easily swayed.

However, Janet's anger and defiance are mild compared to that of Josh Green, one of few black characters from this time period who is allowed to express his anger openly. Black anger <u>did</u> exist during this time span and <u>was</u> expressed in ways other than stealing thimbles from whites. Chesnutt's basis for this novel was in fact the Wilmington race riots of 1898 (Farnsworth viii). So on the one hand it is true that while many blacks put on a mask of docility before white people, outwardly angry blacks also existed, and Twain seems to turn his head away from this phenomenon, whereas Chesnutt plunges headlong into this realistic, though discomfitting, situation.

Perhaps it is the bluntness of a character like Josh Green that produces such a hostile reaction in white readers. Green, whose father was killed by the KKK and whose mother withered into idiocy as a result, is openly

rebellious and is dedicated to revenge. Josh's philosophy seems precursory to a Malcolm X. He has a thorough understanding of the way in which whites force submissiveness on the blacks and refuses to respond in this manner. Dr. Miller and Josh have the following conversation after the former sees the latter returning from a fight:

> 'You had better put away those murderous fancies, Josh,' he said seriously. 'The Bible says that we should forgive our enemies, bless them that curse us, and do good to them that despitefully use us.'
>
> 'Yas, suh, I've l'arnt all dat in Sunday-school, an' I've heared de preachers say it time an' time ag'in. But it 'pears ter me dat dis fergitfulniss an' fergivniss is mighty one-sided. De w'ite folks don' fergive nothin' de niggers does. . . . De niggers is be'n train' ter fergivniss; an' fer fear dey might fergit how ter fergive, de w'ite folks gives 'em somethin' new ev'y now and den, ter practice on. A w'ite man kin do what he wants ter a nigger, but de minute de nigger gets back at 'im, up goes de nigger, an' don' come down till somebody cuts 'im down. If a nigger gits a' office, or de race 'pears to be prosperin' too much, de w'ite' folks up an' kills a few, so dat de res' kin keep on fergivin' an' bein' thankful dat dey're lef' alive. Don' talk ter me 'bout dese w'ite folks, --I knows 'em, I does!'

In theory, it sounds good for the blacks to be patient, to treat whites in a respectful, civilized fashion, and they will return the favor. But the reality blacks faced did not bear this out. Why would whites be willing to change? Humane commands had existed in religion and philosophy for centuries. But these elements did not serve to change the behavior of the masses. Ultimately, peaceful means can only work when there is a mutual respect on both sides, and many whites simply would not respect blacks as long as they lay down like dogs before them. Anger and violence can make the whites respect the blacks, even if it is only to respect them as a threat, as a potential source of danger.

Within the story, we are dealing with a society that is just beginning to face a challenge by the black community. As Farnsworth notes, "Josh's words prove prophetic. The white man is already plotting his answer to the uppityness of the local 'nigger'" (x). This plotting occurs without provocation and without any acts of violence whatsoever by the blacks upon the whites. Instead, the blacks have been acting in the "turn the other cheek" mode, for the most part, a mode advocated of course by Dr. Miller. This merely earns them further oppression.

Any time anything happens in the community, the blacks get blamed for it, as in the previously discussed case of Sandy Campbell. Miller laments (190) that despite the fact that most blacks have been laboring to set a good example and to secure a positive relationship with the whites, a single

black man can, with one criminal act, undermine years of work. But as Josh points out,

> It's mighty easy to neut'alize, er whatever you call it. De w'ite folks don' want too good an opinion er de niggers--ef dey had a good opinion of 'em, dey wouldn' have no excuse fer 'busin' an' hangin' an' burnin' 'em (190).

Josh has noted an important fact: the majority of white society at the time does not want to have a good opinion of blacks and is constantly searching for evidence that blacks are no good. This undermines the work of pacifists; the good they do is ignored. Josh sees a need to force a change in white attitudes.

When Major Carteret, his newspapers, and his colleagues provoke a race riot, Josh organizes a band of men to prepare for the fight, for the defense of the black citizenry. They ask Miller to be their leader, but he, realistically, declines, knowing the blacks will not win:

> My advice is not heroic, but I think it is wise. In this riot we are placed as we should be in a war: we have no territory, no base of supplies, no organization, no outside sympathy--we stand in the position of a race, in a case like this, without money and without friends. Our time will come, the time when we can command respect for our rights; but it is not yet in sight. Give it up, boys, and wait. Good may come of this after all.

Josh responds by saying:

> Come along, boys! Dese gentlemen may have somethin' ter live fer; but as fer my pa't, I'd ruther be a dead nigger any day den a live dog! (284).

Josh makes two important points here. The first and most obvious is that of the necessity for blacks to stop being subservient to the whites, to fight against such dominance even if it means giving up their own lives in the process.

He also brings up the important fact that Miller has more to lose or to gain than the average black. He has had the luxury of being educated, since his father was a free black with enough money to send his son to school to become a doctor. His education gives him another means of being treated decently by the whites, instead of being limited to a reliance on physical force. His education has led him to form a friendship with the white Dr. Burns that he most assuredly would not have had the opportunity to form had he not gone to school to become a professional. Josh, on the other hand, represents the masses of blacks at this time, poor, with no opportunities or options such as education available to them. The only way he can stand up for himself and command any respect from the whites--or at least prevent himself from being treated like a pet dog like such blacks as Jerry-- is by venting his anger toward whites, by using the only power he has, physical force. Even though he is killed in the ensuing fight, and even though the novel depicts no real change in the status quo, at least Josh Green's death

comes only after he kills the supremacist McBane, who helped start the backlash against the blacks in the first place.

There is a certain eloquence in the blunt force of Josh Green. He has simple, honest reactions that, harsh as they might be, are in many ways more realistic than Doctor Miller's trust that "Good will come out of this." As Farnsworth states:

> One cannot help but feel that the scene in which Josh and his cohorts are burned out of the hospital and shot as they make a suicidal charge on their besiegers. . . is the more realistically probable alternative. If Chesnutt's mind and conditioning lead him to side with Miller, Josh Green exerts a darker and in some ways more compelling power over his imagination.
>
> The events of the novel do not provide substantial support for an optimistic view of racial relations in America [such as that view espoused by Dr. Miller]. (xii)

Too much hatred and mistrust on the part of both races must be overcome before Dr. Miller's plan would work. Such supremacists as McBane do not even consider blacks human and view any attempt on the part of black people to improve their condition as a sign of "uppityness" that is to be immediately crushed. Additionally, although their anger is a necessary step in forcing a change in such racist attitudes, angry blacks like Josh Green lump all white people into one category, the

enemy: "I knows w'ite folks, I does." This is most assuredly not the environment of mutual respect and trust that would be needed before Miller's idealistic changes could occur. But, given this society, Josh's attitudes seem to be the more appropriate and realistic response, particularly since we have seen the limitations of Miller's vision.

* * * * * * *

While Josh Green may be different from many of the black characters we have seen in literature up to this point (excepting the American autobiographical slave narratives), he is certainly not a historically unique phenomenon. As Robert Blauner notes, such angry black people existed in the pre-Civil War days of the South, gaining notoriety in the black community and at the same time promoting fear and hostility in the whites:

> . . . the black man who rebelled against the white dominance became the 'bad nigger,' a term that' evoked some respect within the Afro-American group (39).

Blauner also acknowledges something which both Twain and Chesnutt had also noted, that often times whites displayed acts of anger and violence against "uppity" blacks " who violated the norms of racial order" (39). When blacks respond to this the way whites hope they will--by showing fear and by being docile and subservient instead of

angry--Blauner notes that this "assures control of the oppressed group, because emerging protest movements are thereby checked in their early stages" (59).

Yet as psychologist Wulf Sachs notes, it is natural for such hateful acts of violence to breed feelings of anger and further violence in the oppressed people (278). Why does Twain not show this reality of black anger at its full force? An answer to this is suggested by Vincent Harding in his history of the black struggle for equality. Harding points to the fact that pre-Civil War whites often responded to slave revolts and uprisings with great fear, and the "pressured depths of these fears" often led whites to act either in their own "logic-defying demand for punishment and death" or to turn completely from the issue of black anger (324). Since Twain obviously considered blacks to be important, equal human beings, he did not respond the former way. But perhaps there was just enough of the old South left in him that he responded in the latter way as many other Southerners had done.

I am not finally proposing the superiority of Charles Waddell Chesnutt over Mark Twain by applauding his inclusion of black anger in The Marrow of Tradition. Obviously, Twain is far superior as a novelist. Chesnutt's plots are weakened by his thinly-veiled melodrama; his characters are flat; his dialogue is unrealistic, all in direct contrast to the rich characterizations, realistic portrayals, and complete and colorful use of dialogue by Twain. In terms of craft,

Chesnutt is clearly not among the great writers of the South. Yet in terms of not restraining the emotional responses, including anger, from his characters, Chesnutt has broken a barrier that Twain was at least unwilling, if not unable, to break. Perhaps Twain was more concerned with not completely alienating his audience; as Chesnutt discovered by the negative critical and public reaction to The Marrow of Tradition, the white reading public was not ready to accept angry or militant black characters "whose anger and frustration are a potential source of danger within the community" (Payne 20). As Payne notes, this novel, Chesnutt's most outspoken, was the book which "finally cost him his readership" (12). Indeed, despite earlier praise he had received from George Washington Cable and William Dean Howells, the public and critical response grew hostile after this novel, which was perceived to be "militantly bitter" (Payne 11). Perhaps Twain just understood his audience better than Chesnutt did, or had different aspirations for his novels.

Perhaps Twain's repressed black anger is an accurate representation of at least many of the blacks from his time. Surely Jim and Chambers could have been humanized more and could have been allowed realistic emotions, but the social reactions are fitting. Perhaps it is naive to think that racism can be completely and irrevocably overturned within the confines of a couple of novels. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that anyone can completely escape the limitations

of the society in which he has lived. Ultimately, Twain makes a move in the right direction, despite his inability to deal fully with black anger as Chesnutt does. He does not completely shatter the barriers of racism, but he cracks the foundations.

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